

EXPLANATIONS OF EMIGRATION FROM GRENADA, WEST INDIES

by Peter M. Tobias

INTRODUCTION

When I wrote the first draft of the present paper, I realized I would have to deal with two discrete, but related problems: the definition of migration and Grenadians' day-to-day dealings with their own ideas about migration. Because the paper was part of a symposium, and because I was working within a time limit, I decided to focus on the Grenadians' ideas about migration and let others define the term (see, for instance, the paper by Forman in this volume). Because the Grenadian case is unique in this collection of papers, I now feel I should elaborate on my own understanding of what migration does and does not mean.

The Grenadian situation appears to be an archetypical migration case. Residents leave the island, travel thousands of miles, cross international boundaries, and settle in foreign countries with foreign cultures (Grenadians who migrate to Caribbean countries do not meet all these criteria, but on the whole their behavior is the same as that of Grenadians who go the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom).¹ The Grenadian situation is by no means unique, either in the West Indies or in the rest of the world (Tobias, 1975). For example, James Watson (1975) describes how most of the male residents of a Chinese village in Hong Kong leave their natal community to take up temporary residence (from a few months to forty years) in London *among their fellow villagers* and other Chinese migrants, and Stuart Philpott, examining migration from Montserrat, West Indies, found that Montserratians arrive in England and settle together in the same cities, and within the same areas of those cities (1973:167-170). Grenadians, too, appear to have appropriated several areas of New York and London: parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx, in New York, and parts of Shepherd's Bush, Brixton, and Fulham, in London, are referred to as "little Grenada."² Grenadians think of overseas communities as extensions of "home"; West Indian cultural materials are readily available and "home" behavior and environments are dupli-

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cated in each household. The newly arrived migrant or the long-term resident pays lip service to the fact that he is in a foreign country, but he believes himself really to be in a (colder) outpost of Grenada. Migrants only consider themselves foreigners if they fail to duplicate familiar "home" conditions overseas.

The case of my research assistant from Grenada is instructive in this context. He first came to New York in September 1974. He remained for only thirteen days. He explained his unusual decision to return home so quickly—after he had been trying to come to New York for several years—by saying, "Here not like home and I not easy in my mind." He returned to New York in October 1975. Since his return he has found a place to live where traditional Grenadian meals are cooked and where traditional behavior patterns are followed; he has found a job (illegally, because he has an expired tourist visa); he has tied himself into a network of young men from his natal village (who have all come to New York since his first trip, and who, like him, are all in the United States illegally)—this last was most important as far as he was concerned because it enabled him to duplicate his island behavior patterns. He says he can probably "fight up to make three or five years in New York"; now he can live in New York because he has been able to find a place and a situation "just like home." He is no longer an isolated individual in a city of foreigners.

Since this case is typical, how are we to treat overseas Grenadians? Are they migrants, or have they transplanted their own culture to another location? If they have successfully transplanted their culture, can we think of their overseas homes in the same way we would think of their frequent changes of residence on the island? The problem appears to be one of degree, not of kind.

The main difference between Grenadian and other West Indian migrants and earlier migrants to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom is their firm conviction, their ideology, that they will *all* return home "after a while." They do not think of themselves as immigrants because they do not intend to remain overseas. The fact that many West Indians never return home, or that they leave their families, friends, and possessions behind when they do return home, is irrelevant to their self-conception and life style (Philpott, 1973:165-180; Tobias, 1975:99-126). They see themselves as temporary visitors to New York or London, just as they see themselves as temporary residents of "other" parts of the island during their frequent short term visits away from their natal communities. The Grenadian in New York or London "comes out from" [was born in] St. Davids or St. Andrews parish and will return there, if for no other reason than to be buried, as will his counterpart who has moved from his natal parish but has remained on the island. The whole

concept of migration is misleading in the Grenadian cultural context. Those Grenadians who do not think of themselves as immigrants—those who have not intentionally and self-consciously given up their ties with “home”—do not consider themselves migrants: they are simply “away.” They have moved to another, more remote part of Grenada. The important problem in the Grenadian context is to determine why individuals move both on and off the island. The best way to solve that problem is to consider the Grenadians’ own folk model of causation and explanation rather than to invent an anthropological folk model to serve the same purpose.

THE GRENADIAN CASE

Grenadians use two folk theories to explain why people move. Their general theory accounts for all movements; their specific theory accounts for individual cases. Both theories include tacit instructions for their use and controls on their application in different cases. Quite unknowingly these non-professional colleagues of ours have solved one of anthropologists’ most difficult problems by using common sense.

Grenada, now an independent country, is the southernmost of the British Windward Islands in the West Indies. Its population of approximately 110,000 can be categorized along racial or socioeconomic class lines. Some ninety-five per cent of the people are blacks or black-other mixtures, four per cent are East Indians, and one per cent are white. Approximately eighty per cent of the population make up the lower socioeconomic class, fifteen per cent make up the middle class, and five per cent make up the upper class or elite (see Tobias, 1975, or Smith, 1965, for more detailed descriptions).

Residents define emigration as “the act of leaving the island for a prolonged period for one reason or another.” Grenadians do not ordinarily use the terms migration or migrant, however; instead they speak about people as “being away,” or as being away in some location. No matter what terms they use, leaving the island has been an important life style for at least seventy-five years. Grenadians have gone to other Caribbean lands, to Britain, to Canada, and to the United States to work, to learn, and to “see the world.” Estimates of the number of Grenadians now living overseas vary, but most agree that more live off the island than on it.

People’s movements are a constant topic of conversation because many Grenadians want to leave, others have returned after spending time overseas, and almost everyone has friends or kinsmen overseas. Most discussions focus on determining why people leave. On the general level, residents are concerned with the factors that theoretically can cause any individual to leave the island. Discussions elucidate all logical possibilities.

At this level one hears what I call "stock" explanatory reasons (Tobias, 1975:127-169). People leave to work, to get an education, to see the world, and to escape from some temporary local condition such as the immediate hardship caused when a hurricane strikes the island—as happened in 1955. Each reason is acceptable as a sufficient cause on the general level. On the concrete level, "stock" reasons are never sufficient causes; they are called "old talk" (Tobias, 1975:66-69). Old talk can be a lie, or the first thing that pops into a person's head when he is asked a question, or a myth that no one accepts in these modern times. Because discussions on the concrete level deal with known individuals, not with ideal types, a stock reason is only a gloss for a set of idiosyncratic "real" reasons—that is, it serves as a simple gloss for the truth. Residents expect migrants, and their apologists, to use old talk when they explain their reasons for leaving, just as they expect the informal groups that arise to discuss specific cases to seek the truth.

Why do residents make the distinction between old talk and truth? First, residents overtly distinguish between real people, that is people they know, and ideal types. The ideal-type migrant is a local fiction; he does not exist. If he did exist, residents believe he would act without constraint because he would have only the background his creators gave him—he would have no detailed life history. On the other hand, the real individual is the sum of his social identities. He is constrained by his past. If an individual's social identities are known, residents must consider them in any discussion of his case. In fact, discussions of specific cases always begin with the assumption that everyone present knows everything about the individual. Failing that, the discussion will revert to a discussion of ideal types.

Second, residents assume that personal histories determine the true reasons individuals move. As far as I could discover, their point is well taken. Sex, birth order, property holdings, natal area, race, and religion seem to have no selective functions. At one time socioeconomic class probably determined who could afford the expense of going, but that is no longer the case—almost everyone can get the money somehow. Given that situation, residents see personal history as *the* determining factor. Personal history is the actual course of events that has led the individual to a unique biographical situation. Residents assume that the truth, the real reasons an individual moves, are buried in his past. Only a detailed examination of all facets of an individual's biography will supply the truth. What data are necessary to determine the truth in each case is determined *ad hoc*: the general rule is that the "richer," the more "inside," the more personal the information, the closer it will be to some absolute truth. If the group discussing a case decides it does not have enough true information to continue the discussion, it will stop. People

may speculate in private or in public, but that is not the same as a discussion (Tobias, 1975:71-98).

Third, residents see the validity of information as contingent on the manner of its creation. The best information about a migrant's history is supplied by someone who has shared part of the migrant's life. The alter ego presents unimpeachable data because he has lived through history with the migrant and has no vested interest in the outcome of a discussion. In small-scale Grenadian society such "witnesses" are easily found—they readily join discussions. The witness can negotiate the meaning of his information with a group until all are satisfied they understand the truth. Hearsay information is slightly less valuable. It comes from residents who have talked with the migrant in private. People are believed to be less likely to talk old talk in private conversations because they have little at stake—they can always deny what they are reported to have said. The least reliable source of information is the migrant himself. His public statements are motivated, people say, by a desire to put something over on someone. The migrant must use old talk in public—he has to sound authoritative and self-confident. That idea fits a general pattern. People demand that someone speaking in public must speak well—that is, must speak Standard Grenadian English, must show erudition by using polysyllabic words and obscure facts—and must prove he has the ability to handle himself in public—by out-arguing, out-shouting, and out-lying all competitors (Tobias, 1975:46-70). Given that situation, people's reluctance to accept public statements is understandable.

My own experience with one migrant should put all this into perspective. One woman I interviewed was about to leave for Canada. She is a thirty-five-year-old, single, middle-class black school teacher who was acting headmistress at a local school. She had received her bachelor's degree several years earlier and was leaving the island to get her master's degree. An advanced degree would allow her to improve her professional and social position: instead of being a common school teacher, she would be a real professional. Her story is acceptable for any ideal migrant. The woman is a "typical" middle-class Grenadian who aspires to a better position. She recognized an option and took it to improve her chances at fulfilling her life goals.

Several days later I mentioned what I had learned to a group of informants. When they stopped laughing I asked what I had done wrong. At first all they would say was that the woman's story was a bunch of old talk, and that only a white man would believe such "foolishness." *No*, as far as they knew she hadn't lied to me. *Yes*, as far as they knew she was going to Canada to attend university. *But*, what she told me was the same story she told her widowed mother and the priest; the story wasn't the real reason she was leaving, it wasn't the truth! The "real"

reason she was leaving had nothing to do with her career. She had had an affair with a married man who could not leave his wife for her. Just before the woman began to make her plans to leave, her lover had abandoned her for a younger, lighter-skinned, more attractive woman. That caused her to begin thinking about leaving. Most important, she was not leaving because she had been mistreated, but because leaving was the only way she could effectively reassert her independence and punish the man. She withdrew *his* option of returning to her when his young lover tired of him—which is exactly what happened three months after the woman left.

The material in this case and the others I examined is indicative of the use of a two-level theory of migration. Each explanation I received in each case I examined had its own distinct set of factors and its own internal logic. Each seemed equally likely in light of other relevant aspects of Grenadian culture. Each informant's story—each version of the truth—reflected a vested interest. The migrants I interviewed wanted to give sensible answers so I would think them sensible people—that was important when I was asked to write reference letters for the migrants—or they wanted to give answers that I would accept so I would stop bothering them. Residents who explained why other people left did it to prove they were good analysts, were good public speakers, or were knowledgeable members of society—each of which is an important consideration in the Grenadian context. At the time, I could have accepted one level of explanation as more likely or more cogent than the other, but I had no way to determine which level of explanation—the migrants' or the others'—was correct. To discover the "correct truth" I had to follow cases to their conclusions. Each attempt to check a migration datum only served to generate another set of old talk. I obtained two, and in some cases as many as six, "real" explanations for each of forty individual cases. In the teacher's case my other informants' analysis was the truth, while her story was the old talk. She never attended university. Within six months she was back on the neighboring island with her lover. The difference between old talk and the truth is one of perspective. Any migrant's story is old talk by definition because everyone assumes migrants attempt to hide the truth. A discussion group's conclusions are the truth because *the group's manifest function* is to determine the truth, no matter what the outcome or whom it offends.

Perhaps we can apply some of the Grenadians' ideas to our own folk theories. The Grenadian theories show that within the wide limits of possible behaviors, *as determined by the rules of Grenadian culture*, people leave because their biographies, their life histories, offer them no alternatives. The crisis point—the event that forces this decision—is irrelevant to the decision; the individual living in Grenadian culture perceives no choice. The notion of life goals is also largely irrelevant. Only the rare

individual lays out a course of action and follows it. The stay-at-home may leave; the person who plans to go overseas may not; the migrant who plans a short stay overseas may never come home. Only ideal types, who do not have everyday lives, are free of social and historical determinism. Real people, the men in the street, cannot escape their own histories.

Following from that we may have to state our theories in terms of limits and possibilities. We might say something along the lines of: "People leave home for some reason, or reasons, taken from a finite set of culturally defined possible reasons—to work, to learn, to see the world, to escape, etc.—but they do so only because they *somehow* determine that they must leave." Acceptable explanations may be made only *after* the fact; they are contingent upon knowledge of the case and upon the perspective of the analyst. The adequacy of the explanations can only be subjectively determined, not on the basis of the quantity of the data used but on the basis of their cogency and attention to cultural determinants. The whole "problem" of migration is epiphenomenal, as Plotnicov suggests (in this volume). What we must come to grips with is the culture's definitions of human action in general, and of "migration," or "moving," in particular.

NOTES

1. This characterization of migrants' behavior is neither new nor original nor fruitful (cf. Gluckman, 1961; Little, 1965; duToit, 1968). It adequately describes one Anglo-American folk model, but not others. Anglo-Americans tend to classify those entering our countries either as migrants or as people with "legitimate" reasons for being here. The Indian who comes to the United States to attend medical school and become a physician—even if he never returns to India—is a student or a physician, not a migrant; the Japanese salesman who spends ten years selling radios and computer parts in the United Kingdom is an executive, not a migrant. On the other hand, the poor, the non-white, or the non-English speaking individual who arrives and takes an unskilled or non-professional job is a migrant—especially if he makes known his intention to leave after a specific period of time. This folk model tells more about our own world view than it does about what migrants are and what migration means in *their* cultural context. Our own folk model should be studied as a datum; it should not be the basis of social scientific explanations of human behavior.

2. The data upon which this paper is based were collected in Grenada, West Indies, London, and New York between June 1973 and August 1974. The work was supported, in part, by National Institute of Mental Health Predoctoral grant number MH 58635-01. A complete account of that research is given in Tobias (1975).

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